

THOMAS BORTHWICK & SONS – MEAT SALESMEN

Mike Bavin

Sir Thomas Borthwick (1835-1912), the founder of the company, was the son of Thomas Borthwick, who with his brother Alexander owned a butcher's shop at Ratho, on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Sir Thomas started his own business in 1863, principally as a livestock agent at Liverpool and Manchester, probably attracted to the area by the beginning of importation "on the hoof" from Canada and the U.S.A. In 1871 he married Letitia Banks, whose family were involved in the meat trade. The couple had seven children, four sons and three daughters and had a farm in North Wales and a house in the Old Swan district of Liverpool.

During the slump following the Franco-Prussian War, Thomas Borthwick began to sell in Liverpool as well as Manchester. By 1880 he had a sound business with depots in Manchester and Liverpool, adding two more in Glasgow and Birmingham in the next few years.

Although 16,000,000 pounds of canned meat were being imported into Britain each year by 1880, fresh meat in larger quantities was required. The first cargo of frozen beef, mutton and lamb reached London from Australia on 2nd February 1880. The Australian Frozen Meat Company was formed and further shipments followed, with the first from New Zealand in 1882. The London and St Katharine's Dock Co. prepared refrigerated chambers for 8000 carcasses.

Soon after his marriage, two brothers and a sister of Thomas Borthwick immigrated to New Zealand when James Banks became a member of the syndicate that arranged the first shipment of meat to Liverpool. There is a tradition that this first consignment was offered to Banks Senior, but that, feeling too old; he passed it on to his son-in-law. In 1883 Thomas Borthwick was selling agent for the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Company

In 1892 Borthwick bought stall No. 367 at Smithfield and the eldest son (Thomas Banks Borthwick), then aged 18, moved south to open a London office. Thomas Borthwick himself moved to London in 1895, living in Russell Square. The lease on his Welsh farm having expired,

he purchased Whitburgh, a small estate south of Edinburgh which was still in the family in 1963.

Thomas and James, the two eldest sons, were taken into partnership in 1897 and the firm became Thomas Borthwick and Sons. The initials T.B.&S. enclosed in a diamond became the company Trade Mark. By 1900 they had twenty-two shops in Liverpool, Glasgow, Hull, etc. This side of the business probably arose from the continuing prejudice against imported meat. It operated as a separate company under the name John English but was discontinued after the First World War, and since then Borthwick's have kept out of the retail trade.

In the early 1900's, Borthwicks were involved with both the South and North American markets but for various reasons these involvements ceased in 1908. The Borthwick brothers visited New Zealand and Australia for business purposes. The first freezing plant was purchased in 1902 at Waitara, near New Plymouth, on the west coast of North Island. Shortly after, in July 1904, it was destroyed by fire but was in operation again by the following January.

The first investment in Australia was at Portland in 1905, close to the oldest permanent settlement in Victoria, and the freezing works was still the mainstay of the local Industry in 1960. The first freezing plant built by Borthwicks was at Brooklyn on the edge of Melbourne, and started operating in 1908. The company leased a cattle station in Queensland called Banchory in 1914, and in 1960 had two more, further west.

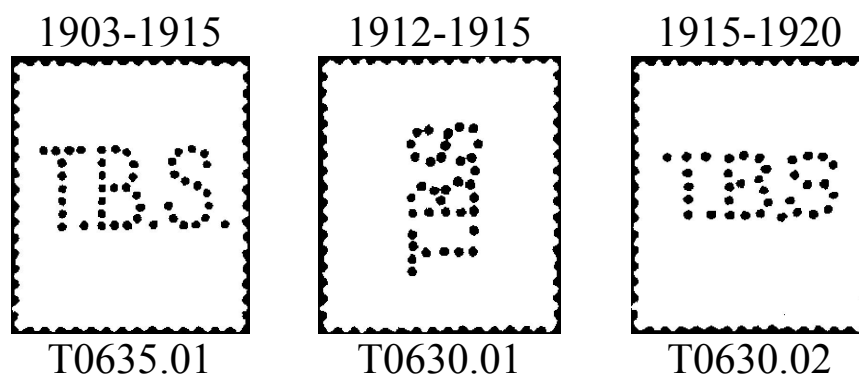
Thomas Borthwick and Sons was formed as a limited company in 1905 with an issued capital of £300,000, having an office at 11 West Smithfield, two Smithfield stalls and eight in provincial markets. Other assets included those in the Antipodes held by the wholly-owned subsidiary Thomas Borthwick and Sons (Australia) Ltd. In 1905, the office was moved to Audrey House, Ely Place, remaining there until 1963. [The 1985 London Telephone Directory lists Thomas Borthwick & Sons Ltd, International Meat Wholesalers, and Thomas Borthwick & Sons (U.K.) Ltd, Meat Importers and Wholesalers, both at Priory House, St John's Lane, E.C.1, and an address in the Central Market.]

Thomas Borthwick & Sons Ltd was wound up in 1927 and another company of the same name formed immediately, with a much larger capital. The Company, now wholesale only, survived the Depression and by 1939 had revenue reserves of nearly £1,000,000. In 1934, a large custom-built cold store was opened at Deptford, which had good road and river access. The shipping of chilled rather than frozen meat increased but was stopped in 1939. The importation of rabbits was particularly important during the Second World War and was still important in 1963.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, the wholesale meat Industry was dispersed from Smithfield Market to approximately 30 depots on the periphery of London under the acronyms MINDAL and LWMSA (Meat Importers National Defence Association Ltd and the London Wholesale Meat Supply Association). Borthwick's staff was actively involved with these organisations and shared with Weddel the job of distributing meat to the Forces in Britain.

Post-war, the Company rebuilt and additional works and cattle stations were acquired in Australia, providing a chain of stations along 3000 miles of coastline, ideal for ships picking up cargo. With the importation of lean beef into the USA from Australia and New Zealand, Borthwicks established T.B. and S. (U.S.A.) Ltd in 1960.

The company is the confirmed user of just one die T0635.01 and T0630.02 has been provisionally attributed to the company. A third die T0630.01 – a FIXO - may also have been used by the company as its period of use fits well with the other two dies.



Ref: A Century In the Meat Trade, 1863-1963 by Godfrey Harrison, London, 1963.